Gender Transformations in Higher Education

by The WASS Collective
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Abstract

This paper offers a critical perspective on issues around gender and sexual transformation within the context of UK Higher Education. Drawing on qualitative data carried out by undergraduate and postgraduate students, the analysis explores some of the diverse and often challenging ways in which young/er women and men are thinking and talking about gender, sexuality and feminism, as well as their strategies for turning ideas into political action. The research focuses on the activities and opinions of students belonging to an anti-sexist organisation within one UK university, who are engaged in campaigns to raise awareness about the damaging effects of gender and sexual inequalities, as well as promoting the popular appeal of contemporary feminisms. Locating the voices and research findings of the students themselves at the centre of the discussion, the paper is produced collaboratively between students and teachers who are involved in both the activist and research elements of this project. The paper also argues for (and provides evidence of) the transformative potential of alternative and critical forms of student engagement and student/ staff collaboration in relation to gender informed academic activism.

Keywords: Feminism, Post-Feminism, Anti-Sexism, Higher Education, Activism, Academic Activism, Praxis, Critical Pedagogy, Collaborative Methods

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In the beginning …

> Collective democracies of difference, struggling over authority and validity at the hyphen between activism and research – now there's an illusion worth having. (Fine, 1994: 31)

1.1 The research, analysis and writing of this paper has been carried out by the 10 authors named above – a group consisting of undergraduates (4), postgraduates (4) and academic staff (2), who are currently involved in the development and practice of pro/feminist activism, research and pedagogy within (and, in some cases, beyond) the University of Warwick (UK). These activities have been largely mobilised by a Students' Union society - *Warwick Anti-Sexism Society* (WASS) - which was established in September 2004. Since its inception WASS has generated a rejuvenated level of political awareness about gender issues amongst students across the university and has a busy activist, educational and social agenda. With a pragmatic focus on gaining members as well as credibility in an allegedly post-feminist era (McRobbie, 2004;Whelehan, 2000) the activities and ideologies of WASS have been characterised by strategic campaigns to make anti-sexism and pro/feminism 'attractive' to a potentially cynical audience of university students. By attempting to challenge stereotypes of feminism that are perceived as a barrier to acceptance and inclusion, WASS members have set about trans/forming feminism for the 'I am not a feminist, but …' generation.

1.2 This article documents some of the diverse strategies of WASS. Now in its third year of activism, WASS retains a 'popular' appeal amongst students and remains committed to principles of inclusion, particularly in relation to women and men working together to challenge sexism. WASS also continues to struggle with what some members refer to as a 'politics of misrecognition', where stereotypes of feminism prompt negative responses to the group, rather than judgement being based on any informed understanding of what WASS aims to achieve. In addition there are new and emergent struggles, as WASS members have taken on controversial campaigns (such as a protest around the sexist content of 'lad mags' and a pro-choice stance on abortion) and have increasingly moved beyond the university campus to forge activist connections with other educational institutions and feminist groups and events.

1.3 In the following section we present the research methods and methodologies, paying particular attention to issues around student and staff collaborative work. This approach has been facilitated by our location at the University of Warwick. The research was funded and supported by the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research[1]. The Reinvention Centre aims to locate research at the heart of the undergraduate experience by encouraging students from all academic disciplines to become research active, produce research outputs and thereby become an integral part of the research cultures of their departments. In part, this involves a measure of collaborative work between students and academic staff. At the same time, the Reinvention Centre focuses on reinventing the spaces in which learning takes place by working with/in other locations and communities, as well as using traditional university space in diverse ways[2]. The intellectual principles as well as pedagogic strategies employed by the Reinvention Centre are subject to ongoing critical reflection and discussion, to which this paper makes a contribution.

The research: the ethics and practicalities of collaboration

2.1 The data presented in this paper draw exclusively on material gathered and analysed during the Autumn term of 2005 by the 10 authors of this paper (hereafter referred to as 'The Collective'). The data consists of: semi-structured interviews with WASS members about their gender activism; group conversations in response to key activist events, namely the setting up of a feminist 'zine'[3], and a discussion following attendance at a public meeting on abortion rights; images and posters with strap-lines devised for WASS advertising campaigns together with email interviews with students responsible for poster design; reflexive journal entries by members of the Collective, and a collection of tape recordings and photographs of various activist events and the collaborative research meetings themselves. All interviews and group discussions were carried out or facilitated by student members of the Collective, and were recorded and transcribed. Student researchers chose to use their own names for the purposes of publication (a decision reviewed throughout the research and writing process) however all other names have been changed. Transcripts, journal entries and images were distributed via email to the entire research Collective who met up on a weekly basis between October – December 2005 in order share thoughts on emergent and overlapping themes, and support each other in terms of the practical and emotional demands associated with carrying out empirical work (Cotterill and Letherby, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1993).

2.2 Any form of shared research and authorship can be both fun and enriching as well as fraught with tensions. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a project involving students and academic staff working together should present a series of ongoing negotiations around the distribution of labour, the effects of differential relations of power and the demands of ethical practice. In outlining the precise nature of the 'collaboration' within our 'Collective', we demonstrate how the interweaving of practical and ethical concerns shaped the research process.

2.3 In terms of the distribution of labour, all data collection was carried out by students, and the decisions as to who did what, and by which methods, were made by individual students on the basis of their skills, interests and access to respondents or research sites. In some cases postgraduate students worked alongside undergraduates who were relatively inexperienced researchers. All such activities were agreed, and their progress monitored, at weekly meetings attended by all members of the Collective. The role of the two members of staff during this period was supervisory, responding to methodological and analytical questions: a relationship that maps onto more traditional modes of research and pedagogy. The group discussions however facilitated dialogic interaction, and students were able to advise and support each other. Analysis of the data was ongoing, and some students wrote up interim findings. A final day of 'collective analysis' and preparation for the final 'writing-up' took place in early December 2005. There were three key outcomes from this meeting. Firstly, we decided upon the main themes and arguments to have emerged from the research and supporting evidence was selected from the wider body of data. In the interests of equity, research undertaken by all eight students was represented. Secondly, we drew up a statement expressing our (collective) methodological and theoretical approach. Finally, we mapped out a structure for the paper. Based on this, the two academic members of staff wrote the paper, incorporating where possible writing already provided by some of the students. Time was of the essence at this point – a practical criteria which outweighed the option of more collaborative writing. A first draft of the paper was circulated to everyone and changes were made. Some of the students felt somewhat disengaged, or even disillusioned, with this part of the process (for one student's reflections, see Perrier, 2006). The necessity of prioritising the requirements for publication – an outcome to which all members were committed - took precedence over other considerations: a situation illustrative of the compromises inherent in much sociological research. A final version was finally agreed upon and submitted for publication: a shared story, but one that is necessarily characterised by multiple voices and creative tensions.

2.4 The remainder of the article is organised as follows. We take the experiences, processes and politics of transformation, in particular transformation of gendered and sexual relations[4], as an overarching theme for

this research. The discussion begins by outlining some of the political and cultural shifts associated with neo-liberal educational reform within and against which this research takes place. We then describe key methodological and theoretical tools which have helped us, individually and collectively, to access, generate, make sense of and re/present our research findings. Following this, we examine the ways in which negative stereotyping around feminism and an associated 'politics of misrecognition' have been experienced and negotiated by WASS members. Collective strategies to raise awareness around issues of gender and widen the popular appeal of anti-sexist campaigning are examined with a critical focus on the ways in which popular culture is deployed in the transformation of feminism. Considering the importance of activist work which has moved beyond the university, we finally turn to reflect on the possibilities and challenges of 'transformative methods' by considering the ways in which a collaborative research project such as this might itself represent a form of academic activism (Castree, 2000; Neary, 2006; Nelson and Watt, 2004). But first, a few words on context.

Neoliberalism, Higher Education and critical pedagogies

3.1 Political changes taking place in relation to Higher Education (HE) form the backdrop to the work of WASS and the substantive content of this paper. In recent years, critical educators have provided sustained critique of the hegemony of neoliberal and (new) managerial values and practices and the concomitant re/definition of contemporary education[5]. In brief, neoliberal values have entailed a shift towards increased marketisation and privatisation of education and the moral ascendancy of the competitive and entrepreneurial values of the market. These developments impact on relations between teachers and students. The pedagogic exchange is reformulated in the lexicon of the capitalist market place as students are increasingly invoked as consumers and teachers as providers of a service, and intellectual enquiry gives way to a process of knowledge deposition. In turn, university education is re/configured in relation to measurable 'outcomes' in terms of student accreditation and employability (Shore and Wright, 1999).

3.2 These factors have consequences for critical and pro/feminist educators, shaping and constraining the limits at which we can think and practice. They impact in negative ways on our time and abilities to engage in critical and intellectually useful conversations and to work collectively to resist the most damaging aspects of neoliberal educational reform. At the same time, activism, rather than being integral to a politicised academy, has become somewhat divorced from the intellectual activities of teaching and research, making the very notion of 'academic activism' seem anachronistic. Through this student and staff research collaboration, in keeping with the wider remit of the Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research, we aim to reinvigorate academic activism by bringing theoretical and activist interventions together as praxis, as we discuss in the following section. But first, we turn to consider the ways in which the role of activism has not only been dis/placed within the academy but has also been subject to challenge and change within feminism.

Challenge, change and (post-) feminist activism

4.1 The 'crisis' of contemporary feminism is well documented. Such debate has been significantly shaped by the notion of 'backlash' (Faludi, 1992) and can be divided into two broad approaches. The first endorses the notion of backlash and defines post-feminism in predominantly negative terms as signifying anti-feminism (Coppock *et al*., 1995; McRobbie, 2004). A second approach provides an alternative reading by recognising, or seeking out, possibilities and multiple meanings at play with/in the notion of post-feminism (Braithwaite, 2004; Brooks, 1997; Budgeon, 2001).

4.2 For the purposes of the present paper there are important overlaps between the idea(l)s of post-feminism and the political context outlined above. University students (as 'young/er' people) are often perceived as being part of, and subscribing to, a feminist backlash. One factor cited in support of this popular claim is an emphasis on individualist notions of 'choice' and empowerment over and above collective responsibility or identity (Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Here, post-feminism is seen to collude with contemporary neoliberal politics as well as powerful media and popular cultural forms that suggest that contemporary women '(can) have it all' (Faludi, 1992; McRobbie, 2004; Whelelan, 2000). A backlash to feminism has also been allied to changing gender relations (Budgeon, 2001; Callahan *et al.* 1999). Whilst gender inequalities clearly persist, women are increasingly demonstrating success in key public arenas such as education and paid work (for critical discussion, see Hughes, 2002). There has been some loss of definition with regards to distinct and clearly delineated gender roles, and social forms of masculinity have undergone significant change (Beynon, 2002). Taken together, these shifts contribute to a widespread recognition that a model in which all men are seen as privileged, and all women as disadvantaged, is flawed (New, 2001). At the same time, more complex models of power and oppression have been (and continue to be) developed, contributing to greater recognition of the ways in which gender intersects with other factors such as 'race', social class, dis/ability and sexual identity. In the light of these interweaving ideological, material and conceptual changes, there has been on-going and often lively debate

as to whether 'post' signifies a rejection of 'old-style' feminism, or a renewed engagement with feminist values and objectives. In addition, the extent to which 'grass-roots' activism lies at the heart of feminism has shifted, mirroring the changes already documented in HE (Bird, 2002).

4.3 We now turn to explore the ways in which these debates frame the activist and research activities of members of WASS, as they seek to shape their individual and collective pro/feminist identities. We begin with a brief discussion of the ways in which theoretical ideas and action have been understood and articulated in relation to this research.

Pro/feminist praxis: research, pedagogy and activism

5.1 As Connell (1987:xi) notes, 'Theories don't grow on trees; theorising is itself a social practice with a politics'. At the beginning of this project, it was difficult to envisage how ten people from a range of disciplines (Sociology, English, History, Politics, Economics and Philosophy), differently located within the university's hierarchies, working together to make sense of data gathered by diverse methods, could agree on a conceptual framework. It was bound to be messy and at least slightly confusing. Indeed, messiness and complexity did characterise our theoretical dialogues. However, we would argue that these features constitute strengths. Theorising is, we would suggest, always messy and confusing, although this is rarely acknowledged (Atkinson, 1990; Letherby, 2003).

5.2 Despite our notable differences, we have worked from the basis of a shared commitment to pro/feminist thinking and practice. This has shaped our methodological approach and informed key research decisions. Drawing on a dynamic and dialectic notion of praxis taken from feminist and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Lather, 1986; Stanley, 1990), questions of power, reciprocity, dialogue and an ethics of care have informed the process throughout (Costley and Gibbs, 2006; Cotterill, 1992; Fine, 1994). As Lather (1986: 258) explains, praxis represents 'a call for critical inquirers to practice in their empirical endeavours what they preach in their theoretical formulations'. In practical terms, and in line with wider notions of respondent validation well established in the qualitative research tradition, our commitment to praxis has meant that research participants outside of the Collective have been offered transcripts and/or drafts of the final article for checking (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Silverman, 2000). Joint discussions involving members of the research Collective as well as other participants have resulted in a number of people reflecting together on transcripts of the same conversations, incorporating different interpretations and strengthening the validity of shared readings.

5.3 Whilst some *a priori* shared understandings and agreements in relation to feminist methodology and praxis have shaped the research, much of the theoretical discussion has emerged from, and been driven by, the (grounded) findings themselves (see Glaser and Strauss, 1968). What emerged strongly from the data was a clear separation between *individual* and *collective* experience with evidence of a progressive movement from one to the other being a central component of pro/feminist activism. We tried to retain a conceptual model capable of explaining this shift, whilst moving to a notion of praxis as a nexus or dynamic meeting place for the personal, political, experiential, emotional and theoretical as well as for protest and activism. These theoretical tools are put to work in the following section as we turn to consider the ways in which getting involved in pro/feminist activism transformed some students' identities and sense of gendered self.

Transforming feminist identities: challenging stereotypes

6.1 WASS focuses on the development of contemporary forms of feminist identity and gender activism conjoining the 'old' and the 'new', and the creation of social (and pedagogical) space conducive to such goals. The aims and objectives of WASS are structured around a view of feminist ideals where the 'personal is political' yet where 'doing' gender politics is seen as the key battleground upon which social transformation is fought. Group activities (events, discussions, debates) feature a significant amount of pro/feminist identity-work in relation to the breaking down of stereotypes and pre-conceptions about feminism in an attempt to disrupt, dilute and counter the politics of misrecognition. Yet membership of WASS resulted, for many participants, in stereotypical derogation. The persistency of stereotypes of feminists as being angry, ugly, unfeminine, man-hating, and lesbian emerged from the data with depressing regularity. Despite several decades of social change, with putatively significant effects on the fixity of gendered and sexual relations and identities, the risks associated with gender/sexual non-conformity remain high, even within the relatively liberalised space of a UK Higher Education institution (see Marchbank, 2005). Particularly potent was the fear that real or perceived lesbianism was integral to feminist identification. As Ruth explained:

> Ruth: My friends … just think that I've turned into a raging lesbian!
>
> Maud: What do they say?

> Ruth: 'Are you doing that lesbian shit again, have you been out campaigning with the women, do you love the women?' [in a friendly joking way]. That kind of thing … I've got a boyfriend, I'm blatantly not a lesbian, but even if I was a lesbian, what's that got to do with you? I think it's just the stereotype of a feminist.

6.2 Whilst recognising the ways in which the 'I am a feminist, but I am not a lesbian' discourse influences individual and collective experiences and expressions of feminism, as indeed it has for decades (see Leathwood, 2004), it is important that this should not be simply read as uncritical heterosexism. Rather, many WASS members are conscious of the complex negotiations involved in refuting stereotypes of feminism whilst refusing to perpetuate heterosexist and homophobic attitudes that characterise non-heterosexuality as a problem or source of shame. Critical debate around these personal and political difficulties has included members of WASS together with the Warwick Students' Union Pride society reflecting on the interconnections between sexism and homophobia. The touchstone for on-going and emergent discussions on this theme is recognition that our localised negotiations take place within the constraints of hegemonic heterosexist and homophobic discourses (local and global). Such recognition is also an important reminder that social transformation can never be an abstract or utopian process but is perhaps better characterised as a set of painful struggles through and against wider discursive formations and social practices.

Feminism Helps Men (FHM): bringing the boys in

7.1 A central tenet of WASS has always been to directly recruit and engage male members. This has helped serve, in part, as a defence against the stereotype of all feminists being (man-hating) lesbians. The active involvement of men in WASS has also been articulated as politically crucial in two ways. Firstly, as men are part of the problems of sexism they need to share the work of finding solutions. Secondly, as many men are also oppressed by structural gender inequalities, there are benefits to men themselves from feminist gains. In an interview with Maud, one of the male members of WASS, Calvin, talked about men's involvement in the group and in the emancipation of women more generally:

> Calvin: I think it's very important, because there's this whole idea of 'you're either with us or against us', and I think that's very difficult, because men, generally, make up half the world, and if you want to feel welcome in the world, you have to be a part of it, and you can't be a part of it if half of the world is against you. So I think it's very important to have the men on the feminist side.

7.2 Calvin's comments here can be considered in the light of significant developments within critical masculinity studies over the last two decades. Emerging as a central trend in gender and sexual politics in the post-1980s, this literature has advocated an active role for men in re/constructing masculinities (see for example Hearn and Morgan, 1990). In turn, radical social, political and economic changes have influenced significant shifts in masculinities in the areas of family, schooling, work and popular culture (see Beynon, 2002; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2004). Understanding these shifts has led to a burgeoning men's studies literature[6]. These theoretical insights have undoubtedly influenced WASS activities such as 'Feminism Helps Men' (FHM)[7], a campaign which strongly argued that men can be part of 'solution' rather being simply the problem of sexism and gender inequity (Canaan and Griffin, 1990). Some men also appeared to be drawn to WASS by an individual discomfort with restrictive gender roles. Calvin continued as follows:

> Calvin: Probably the issue that I feel most strongly about is the whole idea of gender-blurring, and just the fact that we shouldn't have to be pigeonholed into these gender boxes, into these gender stereotypes … I would have felt more comfortable probably in the female stereotypes just growing up in school, because I didn't like sports and I hung out with all the girls. Of course, it made me feel isolated because of all the stereotyping and the social expectations, and I just don't think that's something that you should have to deal with while growing up.

7.3 Calvin's personal struggles with gender stereotypes resonate with a wider literature, particularly in relation to gender and education (Connell, 1989; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Parker, 1996). In an interview with Lucy, another member of WASS, Silas, speculated on how he became drawn to feminism through thinking about his own sexual identity:

> Lucy: You became a feminist when you came to University so do you think you wouldn't have become a feminist if you hadn't come to University?
>
> Silas: It's really hard to say, I don't know where I would be. I would probably be much more narrow-minded. Before I came to university I was gay defined and now I'm bisexual. That's a political thing, but it's also a sexual thing, and I think if I hadn't come to university I wouldn't

have come to terms with my sexuality the way I did. But I don't know if I'd discover it yet or in the future.

Lucy: So why do you think that university was so important for your identity? Do you think it's because it's a more liberal space?

Silas: Yes I think so. I think it was meeting bisexual people, and meeting gay people and realising I wasn't like them that had an effect on me … I'd like to think I'd still be a feminist if I'd never thought about sexuality, but probably not.

7.4 In the context of these masculinities debates, both macro and micro, the idea of men defining themselves as feminist or pro-feminist has become common-sense within WASS. However, activist activities beyond the university have presented challenges, as we explore later, to both the politics and practices of including men in anti-sexist work. For now, we turn to consider some of the ways in which WASS has attempted to address the problems of misrecognition at a collective level.

Winning popular consent: strategies of transformation

8.1 We have documented the potency of particular stereotypes and some students' journeys through these to a pro/feminist identity they were able to feel happy with. Leading WASS members were able to recognise these difficulties, often as a result of their own experiences, and this shared understanding of why becoming a pro/feminist is difficult put confronting the 'politics of misrecognition' at the top of the WASS agenda. Just as at an individual level members would work hard on their presentation of self in order to negotiate a manageable pro/feminist self-image, the Society as a whole made use of key persuasive strategies to promote a positive image of feminism.

8.2 Tracing the development of these strategies back from the beginning of WASS, one member of the Collective, Astrid, analysed some of the posters devised by group members and carried out email interviews with students responsible for advertising decisions. The key theme to emerge related to the use of humour and irony. This theme was found to run across other aspects of WASS' activism, in particular through discussions around the production of an independent feminist 'zine' called *The F-Word*. Bringing together data relating to poster campaigns and the zine has proved productive in terms of exploring the complex relationship between ironic forms of popular culture and feminism.

(Post-) feminism and popular culture: feminism for a culture driven generation?

9.1 As we suggested at the outset of our discussion, popular cultural forms have flourished in line with neoliberal ideals in order to suggest that contemporary women '(can) have it all' through their status as a consumer (Whelehan, 2000). The relationship between popular culture and contemporary feminism appears as one of the key battle grounds for feminist debate: 'third-wave' feminists embrace cultural forms as a critical element of (new) feminisms, whilst others reject this possibility (Coppock *et al*., 1995; McRobbie, 2004). As McRobbie (2004:255) writes, many media and cultural resources are, 'perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism'. However, whilst there is plentiful evidence of feminism becoming 'undone' through playful and ironic cultural resources, there is also evidence of young/er pro/feminists making use of popular cultural resources in creative and potentially transformative ways. In relation to WASS, their poster campaigns and the production of the zine both serve to illustrate this point.

9.2 Between September 2004 and November 2005, publicity posters for WASS featured drawings of 1950s pop-art characters striking dramatic poses, with the addition of relevant humorous captions in a speech bubble. In email dialogue, Mark, who initiated this theme, commented on his decision as follows:

Mark: For me what WASS was doing was popularising feminism and a feminist identity … I felt that WASS was attempting to redefine what people associated with feminism … The message [the banners and posters] were sending out wasn't that feminism is heavy and dull, but the opposite, it's creative and fun.

9.3 In one such poster a man in a hat, suit and bow-tie is pointing at a woman and looking at her with an upset, authoritative, almost angry face. The woman takes up little of the space in the picture, and is half turned away from the viewer as she looks up at the man. In a speech bubble above the man's head, the text reads: 'Look Kitten, I don't give a damn what **you think**, if I **say** I'm a feminist then **by God I am one**!' (bold in original). The poster aimed to advertise the inclusive strategy of WASS with regards to the involvement of men and also raised some of the contentious and complicated issues around men's identifications with pro/feminism, as already discussed. However, reflecting on his choices a year later, Mark recognises that at the time his choices were driven more by questions of style than content:

> Mark: Now when I think about it, that poster raises quite interesting questions about masculinities within feminism, but at the time I didn't think about it that way. Rather I thought that the use of humour and irony was a good way to attract people's attention. By laying out stereotypical gender roles, such as the '50s ones were, and then adding feminism or gender-think to them, kind of made it into an in-joke with the viewer, saying, 'yeah, we both know these gender roles are absurd'.

9.4 In other words, the posters represented a conscious strategy to avoid dismissal by non/anti-feminists and to challenge stereotypical views of feminism. There is evidence of an explicit desire to align feminism with the mainstream, rather than as a radical alternative. The strategic deployment of humour deserves particular attention. These posters were seeking to include the viewer in the joke by encouraging them to identify with WASS. At the same time, the posters appeal for recognition of the fact that WASS do not fulfil the negative and often derogatory elision of feminism with humorlessness. The strategic use of irony has become a vital instrument for the group in their attempted transformation of pro/feminist identities.

9.5 Of course, such strategies are not 'new' in that ironic humour has played, and continues to play, a significant role within the feminist movement as a powerful means of resistance and collectivity (see FAAB Collective, 2005; McWilliam, 2000). In particular, there is a history as well as a revival of the self-publishing, playful activism characterised by feminist 'zines'. *The F-Word* began at Warwick in October 2005 by a group of gender activists who wanted to, as Lorraine put it, '… get it out there and get people thinking'. One of the contributors, Barbara, reflected on a piece she had written:

> Barbara: I think [the zine] is really important about raising awareness. That's why when we were writing the article, we really didn't want to make it a rant because … you know the whole stereotype like angry women like ranting about rights and stuff, and we wanted to make it funny as well. So it'd be fun and people would enjoy reading it and not think 'oh god she's ranting again' and throw it away.

9.6 These ironic and inclusive strategies for transforming perceptions of feminism do indeed resonate with many aspects of post-feminism. However, WASS members reject the 'post -' label and instead articulate a particular 'brand' of feminism which draws on traditional idea(l)s and approaches whilst developing new ones in response to contingent (political and cultural) demands. Importantly, within WASS these self-consciously 'cool' and ironic campaigns have run alongside, and intertwined with, more 'serious' forms of resistance and praxis both within and beyond the university. Some examples of these have included: a protest campaign around 'lad mags[8]'; WASS members taking an active role in the *European Youth Exchange* in Portugal (July 2005) and in *FEM05,* a national conference for women's rights (5 November 2005)[9]; participation in public political events such as the meeting about abortion rights at the House of Lords (26 October 2005)[10] and a 'Reclaim the Night' march and rally held in London as part of International Violence Against Women Week (25 November 2005).

9.7 Significantly, many of these activities listed above have also taken WASS beyond the confines of the university campus. There have been important outcomes to this in terms of initiating new challenges and debates around pro/feminism, often across the 'old/new' or 'second/third wave' divide. In addition, the movement beyond the university has highlighted the pedagogical value of widening and reinventing the spaces in which to carry out activism, research and learning.

Blazing a trail?: new activist spaces and new challenges

10.1 Involvement in activism beyond the university has been challenging and productive for WASS members in terms of critical reflection and praxis. In particular, the issue of masculinities and men's engagements with gender politics came to the fore. In more 'traditional' feminist settings such as the *FEM05* conference the students who attended from WASS were surprised and depressed to find the dominant feminist discourse to be 'men are the problem not the solution'. In a journal entry after the event, Juliet mused on the subject of the involvement of men in feminist activism, 'Are we blazing a trail in academia or are we just out of touch?' The active inclusion and involvement of men in WASS was not the only stumbling block. On 26 October a group of students and Students' Union activists, including four members of the research Collective (Jen, Sam, Amy and Lorraine) attended a public meeting about abortion rights at the House of Lords in London. The abortion debate had been high on the recent political agenda for WASS as members, following considerable internal debate, put their support behind a motion for Warwick Student Union to retain a pro-choice policy[11]. Immediately following the public meeting, the students recorded a group discussion in which they questioned each other about their feelings about the event. Some of their responses point to novel 'generational' tensions:

> Ceri: Well, I found it motivating and devastating. Sometimes I just find it really hard … I think

people just can't grasp or won't, or don't, accept the scale or the magnitude of the problem of sexism. And I found it really frustrating that a lot of the older people – who'd obviously been on the campaign trail all of their lives – still couldn't bring themselves to call themselves feminists, in the context of a pro-choice debate.

Sam: Nobody said, 'It's a feminist issue'.

Ceri: You're quite right, Sam. Nobody used the word 'sexist'.

10.2 In the context of the post–feminist debates outlined earlier, this exchange marks an ironic departure from the thrust of the 'backlash' arguments. Here, it is the 'third-wavers' who are disappointed that the 'older' generation reject the labels of feminism and sexism. As Ceri indicates by commenting that she found the meeting, 'motivating and devastating', the movement between the university and other activist spaces had contradictory effects. On the positive side, it appeared to provide a catalyst for transforming individual emotions into collective energy. Amy spoke of her feelings of 'excitement' and the fact that in the context of renewed threats to a pro-choice stance on abortion, an active engagement with the issues beyond the university was, 'good for galvanising you, really'. Jen commented, 'I found it very inspiring, because I was feeling quite tired over the past couple of weeks – but I'm ready for action', and Ned similarly spoke of, 'feeling incredibly motivated now to get back [to Warwick] and really, really do stuff. It's a long time since I've felt like this actually – I think it's more to do with the venue than anything else … it's just being around other people who seem so motivated, and the level of enthusiasm in that room.'

10.3 Ned reflects here on the importance of the venue (a committee room in the House of Lords) and the ways in which being there, and engaging with people who shared a pro-choice perspective but were from very different backgrounds (for example politicians, journalists, a male gynaecologist), was motivating. Other students echoed his feelings about the space, prompting some reflective discussion amongst the research Collective on the pedagogical value of moving beyond the classroom and the campus in order to 're-charge' intellectually as well as emotionally. Just as, at an individual level, identification with feminism needed the validation of others in order to sustain it and transform it into activism, the external validation of individuals and groups outside of the university re-energised and re-affirmed the collective strength of WASS. During the group discussion, Sam reflected on this as follows:

Sam: Tonight's [House of Lords] meeting – I felt renewed … We [WASS] got mentioned … and that means people know that Warwick is doing something, that young people are doing stuff, and that there's women and men there, as well.

10.4 Within the framing landscape of post-feminism, a recognition of the scope and form of students' political engagements beyond the discursive and physical space of the university signals that academic pro/feminist activism can, and should, have a role to play in wider social transformation.

Transformative methods: the possibilities of academic activism

11.1 Through a consideration of the ways in which individual pro/feminist impulses are transformed into collective identities and activist possibilities, we have highlighted the significance of the university itself, as well as involvement in other pedagogical and activist spaces. Asked by Maud whether she would have become a feminist if she hadn't come to university, Ruth replied:

Ruth: No … I don't think I'd have had any way of knowing more about it. I would just have kind of stuck at the level of 'I think women are equal in society'. I think I would have just stayed at that, and probably just not really done much more than that.

11.2 Whilst we recognise that people find multiple routes to feminism, in the context of the interconnected political, cultural and educational landscapes outlined at the beginning of this paper, Higher Education has an increasingly important role to play in nurturing pro/feminist praxis. Based on the present findings, as well as a wider literature, we would argue that critical engagement with the politics and practices of masculinities must be central to this role. In line with pro/feminist masculinities literature (for example, Connell, 2005) WASS members articulate a clear sense of the 'problems and solutions' of sexism. In short, specific forms of socially constructed masculinities are identified as one of the key problems, and a critical engagement with this intellectually, as well as through social relations and practice, are therefore seen as being integral to seeking and implementing solutions.

11.3 In order to contribute to a wider social progressive agenda, it is also important that pedagogic and activist spaces be reinvented in meaningful ways. This dialectical movement of students and academics, and their ideas and actions, between the university and other communities, is paramount if the functions of HE are not to be subsumed by economic and political imperatives. Whilst these factors need to be critically acknowledged as shaping and constraining our learning and teaching as well as emotions and actions, the

discussion we have presented here provides some evidence of how we can begin to work within the system in order to transform it.

11.4 Within our daily practices, reinventing the spaces of research, pedagogy and activism is also important. Throughout this research project, we have been forced to reflect on how we develop and implement praxis within and through the powerful hierarchies of academia. Each differently located within these hierarchies, the process of researching together as students and lecturers has been difficult as well as exciting; tiring as well as energising. Against the well-publicised limitations of traditional pedagogy characterised by an educator 'banking' knowledge in heads of uncritical student 'vessels' (Freire, 1970), as well as a growing recognition of the negative effects of separating research from learning (Blackmore and Cousin, 2003), many of the benefits of more critical methods, such as presented here, are immediately apparent. The WASS Collective has provided space for constructive dialogue with regards to some of our differences, facilitated the acknowledgement of our strengths and vulnerabilities and, in this sense, we have certainly learned from, and with, each other. At the same time, some parts of the process have been difficult, requiring ongoing negotiation. We believe that it is important not to uncritically valorise methods associated with feminist and critical pedagogies or declare them as inherently empowering in an abstract manner (Dillabough, 2002). Rather, through our concrete experiences presented here we would like to call for a renewal of experimental and unconventional methods of research and pedagogy which foreground the importance of shared risk and responsibility, and are committed to principles of wider social, including gendered and sexual, transformation.

11.5 This is not so much a conclusion, but more a hopeful beginning. There is much work to be done.

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Notes

[1] The Reinvention Centre for Undergraduate Research is a collaborative Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) based between the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick and the School for the Built Environment at Oxford Brookes. CETLs represent a major HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England) initiative. In 2005 the Reinvention Centre was awarded £500,000 recurrent over five years, and £800,000 capital funding. Further information on the Reinvention Centre is available at <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention/>. The work of the Centre and Centre members covers a range of progressive pedagogies. The article represents the views of the authors.

[2] The Reinvention Centre has used capital expenditure to cover the design and development of new social learning and teaching spaces at both Warwick and Oxford Brookes. For example see <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/research/cetl/westwood/>.

[3] A zine is a specific form of anti-mainstream, print based publication characterised by cut and paste production techniques. For further information see <http://www.grrrlzines.net>or to read reviews of other feminist zines in the UK <http://www.thefword.org.uk/reviews/2002/04/zine_reviews_the_sequel>.

[4] The complex and contested concepts of gender, sexuality, and the relationship between them, whilst beyond the scope of this paper, are used in such a way as to recognise that gendered identities and practices are enacted through a binary of hetero/sexuality in such a way that gender and sexuality cannot be considered in isolation (Butler, 1990).

[5] For definitions and further discussion of neoliberalism and managerialism in relation to HE, see Deem (2001).

[6] It has also led to the growth in number and popularity of university courses in the study of masculinities. There is an undergraduate module on the *Social Construction of Masculinities* offered within Sociology at the University of Warwick in which a number of WASS members participate.

[7] The FHM campaign began as part of the University's events for International Women's Week in March 2005. T-shirts for WASS members, posters and flyers promoted the idea that Feminism Helps Men and featured the deliberately playful slogan 'WASS: Let's get on top of sexism', alongside the logo normally associated with the popular 'lad' magazine.

[8] The campaign aimed to raise awareness of the sexist and, some argued, pornographic, content of magazines such as *Loaded, FHM, Nuts* and *Zoo*. A Students' Union motion at Warwick was passed in favour of putting such magazines in less prominent positions in the Union shop. For information on related national campaigns see <http://www.object.org.uk>.

[9] Information available at <http://www.femconferences.org.uk>.

[10] For further information see <http://www.abortionrights.org.uk/content/view/92/49/>

[11] At a Warwick Students' Union general meeting on 25 November, the 'pro-choice' motion was defeated by 1429 votes to 969.

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